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This Could Have Been an Email: Adapting English Language Arts Curriculum to Better Suit Modern Communication Needs

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THIS COULD HAVE BEEN AN EMAIL:
ADAPTING ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS CURRICULUM TO BETTER SUIT
MODERN COMMUNICATION NEEDS

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Communication is a tool we as human beings use daily: we talk, we text, we send emails, and attend Zoom calls. Yet, once the word *communication* is uttered within an academic setting, hesitancy and tension among the participants seem to grow. Students consistently argue about the task of academic writing and speaking. They question the purpose, claiming it does not feel in line with the skills and tasks required of them upon graduation. They question the language, as formal, academic writing is not often seen anywhere but in an essay. Memorized speeches performed in front of a room without visuals seem archaic in the age of TikTok and TedTalks. What *is* the value of a five-paragraph essay to students who are entering a post-secondary world where communication is growing more nuanced and technical than in previous generations? How can we as educators bridge the concept of organizing ideas and knowledge through words while also balancing the realities of how communication will most likely be used within future experiences?

The purpose of this capstone is to explore and build upon the direct links between the academic standards and the postsecondary workplace skills expected of students. Through the creation of a resource website, I will outline activities based on post-secondary college and career skills, such as resume writing, visual presentations, etc, as well as how those activities align with state and national standards for secondary English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms. I will focus on answering the research question of *How can College and Career Readiness standards be taught in alignment*

with state and Common Core ELA standards to improve student communication skills and academic engagement?

This chapter will begin with an overview of my own experiences, both as a student and an educator within an ELA classroom, as well as how these experiences have directed me toward the research question above. I will then explain the greater ties between this topic and the education sphere as a whole, describing how students, schools, and communities as a whole can be impacted by the implementation of this work. I will conclude this chapter with a summary of further chapters and the research that will be presented there.

Background

As a student, I loved reading and writing. I took every English class offered to me and lived for color-coded annotation flags and the excitement in my teacher's voice as they discussed their favorite pieces of literature. I wrote countless five-paragraph essays and could have recited the structure in my sleep. It wasn't until my senior year, during Advanced Placement (AP) Literature and Composition, that this structure was ever questioned - and even then not until after our AP testing was over. Freed from the structure of "this is how you *should* write" our teacher challenged us to think outside of the box. Instead of a final paper that showcased our knowledge, we were told to actually create something that communicated our learning. Products ranged from skits filled with characters modeled off our novels, to paintings, to written journals, and more. It was clear that, when given avenues to explore, we as students took the leap and dove right in. Never before had I been given this opportunity of pure choice, and the experience was one that has stuck with me through the years.

Fast forward to my collegiate experiences and choice no longer felt as freeing as it did then. I did not relish the freedom to create skits or songs, and I definitely did not want to write even more papers. I just wanted to analyze novels and reflect on what could be gleaned from the texts we were reading to foster meaning within my dreamt future classroom. I was no longer thinking solely as a student; I was exploring texts as a future teacher. I wanted my knowledge and assignments to reflect the skills I knew I would need leaving the college world behind. I began to wonder what the balance was between tasks that encouraged meaningful and applicable communication of ideas and the tasks that just funneled our thoughts through traditional formats. In a world that had become, and continues to be, very standardized, I began exploring the ways I could build avenues for both myself and my future students to express ourselves. I knew there was more to communicating than just essays and paragraphs, and I worked to find options that tapped into interests and skills already present as well as skills individuals would eventually need.

Upon entering my own classroom as a fresh, year-one teacher, I found the realities of creating any, let alone student-centered, curriculum units to be difficult. Student resistance to many academic activities was already well in place by the time and questions of relevance were in abundance. The resistance to methods of communication, especially writing, appeared in questions and statements every day. Why do I have to do this? What is the point? Do we have to present in front of the whole class? Can't I just make a video? Generally, it felt like student resistance developed due to two reasons: hesitancy or fear of not being able to communicate in the right way or feelings of

discontent about the formats school imposed, arguing the tasks felt like busy work or something nontransferable to future situations.

I did my best to reformat our discussions of reading and writing to pinpoint where the skills being presented could take you. *You want to be able to defend your thoughts! Knowing persuasive techniques will help you to negotiate for higher salaries!* We were still writing and presenting based on the five-paragraph essay structure, but I told myself we were writing them with a *purpose*. It was a couple of years before I began to question the necessity of those well-known five paragraphs and see them instead as a marker of my own hesitancy to adapt and change.

The Bigger Connections

The world around us is steadily growing, and students are often met with school mission statements that mention “global citizenship”. Yet, despite the fact that we as educators acknowledge that the space in which our classrooms sit is changing, the content and activities we use within our classrooms have remained much the same. Students, however, are pushing back more and more on the traditional structures that truly do not exist outside of the walls of a school building. Instant messaging, video content, slide decks, and email conversations or virtual meetings in lieu of face-to-face - the world of communication is changing, and our students are screaming for schools to change with it. Creating realistic and organic models of professional communication is an asset to students as they transfer from school to this larger community.

Teachers everywhere spend a great deal of time creating lessons and content that connect not only to content but also to the students in their room. Reflecting upon my first years as an educator, I realized that as much as I loved teaching writing and

communication, the avenues through which this was done seemed stagnant. I did not want to force my students to follow the traditional pathways when newer, more direct routes could be explored. However, as a beginning teacher, it was hard to convince others of the compatibility of new or unique perspectives on academic standards.

Throughout my five-year educator journey, I have worked in three different districts and found that, unilaterally, departments and classroom teachers enjoy having a curriculum that essentially stays the same year to year. Yes, activities are modified and adapted, but overall the same books, same projects, and same speeches are implemented each year, despite a changing student population within the classroom. Conversations of change are often met with *that's fine for you, but I'll keep doing things my way*, not due to a lack of care, but often from a lack of time.

It is no shock that creating documented, standards-based lessons takes time. It is also not a shock that time is a commodity many teachers feel they never have enough of. By utilizing the same structure and activities as years prior, teachers can instead use their valuable work time on other aspects of the job such as grading, family outreach, etc. These feelings of complacency or hesitancy to change are compounded by the fact that Minnesota academic standards are only reviewed once every ten years (MDE, n.d.). Pushing off discussions of updating courses or alignment until the next review seems logical until one pauses to reflect just how much the world around us can change in two years, let alone ten. It is not my goal to add more to the already heavy plates of educators in this country. Instead, it is my hope that through this work, fellow educators will have a toolkit of activities and resources that are already documented and aligned.

Pinpointing the College and Career Skills that Matter

In my second year of teaching, I had the opportunity to attend a community-led job panel with my junior students. Members of the community who worked in various sectors of employment came to the high school auditorium and talked about what pathways students could follow within their industries after high school. Employers present talked about any schooling or licensing necessary to do what they do; they talked about salaries and daily tasks; they talked about perks and benefits. However, what caught my attention most, and urged me toward this project focus, was hearing nearly every employer present talk about the importance of new employees being able to communicate and work with others. Hearing this presentation reiterated that something is missing in how we teach students communication skills, the way they work with others and communicate their thoughts is not transferring well to the outside world. I knew it was more important than ever to begin to continue developing strategies that would help students transition to their next chapters after their high school years.

Teaching students what workplaces want and need in employees is a crucial aspect of education that is currently missing or underdeveloped in school curriculums. According to a 2022 National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) study, competencies of career readiness such as critical thinking, communication, and professionalism all reported an importance to proficiency differential of at least 40%. This means that major employers found that applicants for many jobs were lacking proficiency in these areas, despite a workforce that viewed them as important to a workplace's ideal standard of employability. By incorporating these competencies into the classroom, all skills that standards-based instruction can include, it allows students to

practice and build their comfortability in what these things mean before entering into an education or career field that will expect these things to already be known.

As I personally began this work, I realized that being an educator whose own career experience is limited to the education field limited me. Apart from some part-time work experiences in other sectors, I myself did not know what careers were asking for, and the journey of discovering what different job sectors want and need for communication skills was a lot more complicated than I had anticipated. Communication is dependent on the situation and audience at hand, so no two industries will view effective communication in exactly the same way. How do I as an educator generalize the best traits that could apply the most universally? I began to look into new-hire advice websites, resume tips, and general new graduate articles. While these resources gave me a foundation upon which to begin building some activities, many of these resources lacked a scholastic base, instead framing tips through personal experience or perspective. However, for a teacher still in the starting stages of their career, I did what I could with what I had at the time.

Now, a few more years into my career and this work, I have settled into the task of scholastically driven curriculum development and unit design. Looking into workplace trends, communication, and industry-specific writing strategies will allow for more concrete and defensible curriculum shifts from traditional writing to what I call writing with a purpose, or empowering students to use communication in ways authentic to themselves and their purpose. My goal is that, through the work of this project, others will see the benefit of joining me on this journey as well.

Summary

This chapter offers an overview of the journey that brought me to my research question: *How can College and Career Readiness standards be taught in alignment with state and Common Core ELA standards to improve student communication skills and academic engagement?* It builds upon an explanation of my own experiences within the classroom, as well as preliminary research into workplace skills and classroom curriculum design to explain the need for activities and content that bridges the academic classroom and the postsecondary world.

Chapter Two will continue the review of relevant literature surrounding the topics of student skills, academic standards, classroom design, and workplace skills and expectations, with an overarching focus on both verbal and written communication. Exploring the concept of how and where communication is used, as well as how it is viewed in a traditional academic setting will serve as a foundation upon which I can build resources and activities that will help students grow in their own communication skills.

Chapter Three will describe the process of creating a virtual website resource and the content that will be included there. Based on the research gathered, I will be creating a virtual resource for ELA educators looking to explore activities and curricula that serve both CCR and ELA standards. The goal of this website's creation is to streamline standard alignment by offering a resource to educators that showcases activities and directly states the link to academic standards, as well as the connected postsecondary skills. Educators are often told of academic standards and workplace skills, but by outlining exactly how the two connect, they can be certain of the academic integrity of the activity, despite its, potentially, less traditional product.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

My work for this project is focused on an analysis of the secondary English Language Arts (ELA) and College and Career Readiness (CCR) standards and how best to prepare students for life after secondary school. All research will focus on answering the question of *How can College and Career Readiness standards be taught in alignment with state and Common Core ELA standards to improve student communication skills and academic engagement?* My project will be the creation of in-classroom activities as well as educator reflection questions to help introduce, potentially, new concepts, activities, and curricula educators could use within their ELA classrooms. In Chapter Two, I explore literature that discusses academic standards, specifically the current MN ELA and College and Career Readiness standards, employability skills and current college and career readiness programming, and classroom curriculum and instruction. All of these topics are intertwined with how we as educators interact with secondary ELA classrooms and students.

Educational Standards

In the United States, discussions of what could, or should, be taught in schools have often taken place outside of the classroom itself. Bindewald, Tannebaum, and Womac (2016) argue that the purpose of education is not solely to ensure student readiness for college and careers, but also to ensure that they have all the social skills to not only participate in but also challenge and grow the democratic society within which they live. The idea of standardizing academic content outcomes across schools or institutions began its presence in American education in 1894, with the Report of the

Committee of Ten, and has continued to evolve since then (McConn & Blaine, 2018).

The Report of the Committee of Ten served a specific student population, those who were college-bound, and thus the standards that were implemented focused directly on skills institutes and stakeholders of higher education deemed necessary (McConn & Blaine, 2018).

According to the analysis of McConn and Blaine (2018), the ideologies that have impacted United States academic standards fall into one of four categories: essentialism, perennialism, progressivism, and reconstructionism. These four ideologies work to frame where the impetus of learning should occur from - educator or learner, as well as what the desired outcome of learning should be. Essentialism and perennialism both focus on an educator dispensing knowledge to students, while progressivism and reconstructionism shift the center of knowledge development to students themselves. This spectrum of perspectives is mimicked in educational pedagogies as well, with a push for student-centered learning and peer-to-peer dialogue and collaboration.

McConn and Blaine (2018) outline the progression of American ideologies surrounding education standards. Early American academic standards proposed an essentialist view of education - students were to learn specific skills and content that would set them up for success in future roles. Later, as technology and societal interactions changed, progressive views of education called for students to be the driving force behind learning, moving education from solely skill acquisition to direct application (2018). While the theory behind academics shifted from essentialism to a more progressive view over time, the influence of No Child Left Behind and other national education policies, led to the creation of Common Core standards, which again focused

on specific skills or mindsets that students would need in their next steps (McConn & Blaine, 2018). This impact of documenting and categorizing student academic success would alter the trajectory of United States Education to come.

Over time, what should be considered essential, as well as how students should be taught, has continued to be an ongoing and sometimes tense, discourse in American education. While today's education and standards are designed for all students, there are still stakeholders that hold certain perspectives and views of what academic content and language should look like. Standardization, by definition, means there is a model that should be emulated by all. The fact that we as an educational force have been conditioned to uphold an idea of what is right, and are trying to create a mold that students will match and assimilate into can be challenged. It is through the incorporation of a more varied understanding of language and communication perspectives that we can ensure an education for students that truly sets them up for their unique futures.

Common Core Standards

With a near-national level implementation of the most recent Common Core Standards, this push for foundational layers of curriculum building continued. Common Core was designed by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) to build a unified learning path for students to follow, with standards that work to ensure that all students, regardless of location or other factors, would gain the same preparatory skills before leaving public schools (CCSSO & NGA Center, 2022a). However, the applicability of these standards, as well as the way they are modified can vary from classroom to classroom and state to state.

The CCSSO and the NGA Center (2010) maintain that all standards are developed through a process that honors research, post-secondary expectations, and rigor. The standards that are included are “essential for college and career readiness in a twenty-first-century globally competitive society” (CCSSO & NGA Center, 2010). However, the desired educational outcomes presented through Common Core have not come without their own criticism and critiques. Tampo (2018) challenges the creation of the Common Core, stating that, when taken directly as written, the standards leave students with an education that does not value creative, autonomous, or playful learning. Furthermore, Tampo cites a 2015 survey from New York State Allies for Public Education that found many saw the standards as “ingenuine learning”, and that students were often required to read, and “regurgitate an author’s thoughts” instead of being encouraged to synthesize and cultivate their own understandings and perspectives (p. 2). Bindewald, Tannebaum, and Womac (2016) also see the importance of thinking for oneself, and state that schools should not only teach students to be individuals, but that “critical thinking is essential for the healthy functioning of a democratic state, lest its citizens fall victim to groupthink, mass media manipulation, or the propaganda and brainwashing of authoritarian regimes” (p. 4). With an emphasis on the importance of critical thinking and its relationship to literacy in a changing global age, English language arts standards ideally create a foundation for not only educators but the public as a whole.

While other forms of communication, such as writing, speaking, and listening, are present within the Common Core Standards, much of the skills presented have to deal with close and critical reading skills. Minnesota State Standards (2010) argue that the skills present in the Common Core emphasize “what it means to be a literate person in the

twenty-first century” (MDE, p. 4). A necessity for students to engage in critical reading of both literature and nonfiction texts, especially given the easy accessibility of information and data present to everyone through growing global media and the internet is seen throughout the standards written (CCSSO & NGA Center, 2010). Bindewald, Tannebaum, and Womac (2016) see this as a positive, stating that students learn to analyze a text for its whole self, learning about an author and their potential biases, analyzing evidence, and citing their own for any reasoning. However, not all see the rigidity of evidence and text-based analyses as positive. As stated by Tampio (2018), many parents see this focus on text-based evidence and questioning as limiting students' thoughts and thus challenging the very premise of critical thinking that is desired. This challenge of common goals, and different perspectives, is something that translates directly into the classroom itself and impacts how educators implement the standards themselves.

The desire to promise equal learning opportunities through standardization in essence sounds like an obvious premise of nationwide education, and yet it is something that is inherently hard to achieve. There is an unavoidable duality to education that is present in all interactions with standards: there is direct instruction on what to teach and yet no two lessons will ever be exactly the same. Every teacher, student, and classroom, let alone school, district, or state, represents a different learning circumstance, and therefore it is impossible that standardized lessons will be implemented or experienced in exactly the same way. Furthermore, it could be argued that there should be differences in order to best meet students where they are. But if these differences are necessary, the doorway is opened to more nuanced discussions of what could or should be added, as

well as arguments that there should be no standards at all. In these moments, educators are being held to an impossible standard themselves, caught between the explicitly required and the community desired.

Minnesota ELA Standards

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) adopted and adapted the Common Core standards for English Language Arts in 2010. English Language Arts is the only Common Core content standard that Minnesota utilizes in its schools (CCSSO & NGA Center, 2022b). Any state that uses Common Core standards must adhere to all standards included, but also retain the option to add other standards to their individualized state-level requirements (Minnesota Department of Education, 2010), something which Minnesota has chosen to do. According to MDE (2010), the standards are required components for classroom curriculum; they are developed with the intention that teachers will be able to mold instruction to best fit the students they work with and the school systems they work within. Having standards or requirements that strike the balance between giving detailed enough outlines for foundationally structural instruction, while also offering enough flexibility for quality and applicable curriculum decisions, is a point of tension not new to Common Core. In a study done by Ajayi (2016), many teachers stated that in their first implementation of Common Core they felt they needed more quality resources, as well as more direct professional development (PD) and collaboration time to feel confident in their application of the standards. It is one thing to have standards within a district, and quite another to empower and support educators in showcasing them fully and appropriately.

Currently, under review, the Minnesota State Standards are being analyzed and updated to best fit our world today. The goal of this review and revision is to ensure that students are being supported in the work to become “effective and critical consumers and producers of ideas” (MDE, 2020) who can share and contribute their ideas and skills to the society within which they live.

Literacy. The feature of literacy and its importance is something that both the Common Core and Minnesota standards call out specifically. The specific language used by MDE (2010) details that literacy skills should not be taught in English classrooms only, rather students should be developing literacy across disciplines. As information and media become increasingly available across communities via the internet and other technology, students’ abilities to analyze, synthesize and form conclusions about texts using their critical thinking skills become even more imperative. This skill set should be utilized in all content areas and fostered using both informational and literary texts.

For literacy considerations, the review and revision call for students to be empowered in their selection of texts, citing that self-selection of texts and topics is influential and important for student engagement. Literary texts should be discussed in the context of perspective, where students are not only reading texts that reflect their own identity but also texts that cause them to reflect and learn about a perspective other than their own (MDE, 2020).

Written communication skills are also outlined directly within the Minnesota standards. MDE (2010) outlines the three main proponents of writing instruction as: “writing to persuade, to explain, and to convey real or imagined experiences”. These three components of writing allow students to practice many of the real-world

communication skills they will need in future courses, roles, and industries. As students progress through the K-12 school model, MDE (2010) emphasizes that although all three writing focuses serve a purpose, the emphasis of writing activities should focus on either explaining or persuading as this will allow students to gain experience in crafting arguments and finding evidence through the writing process.

The written standards have also been clarified by MDE through the most recent review. MDE (2020) states that students should now feel comfortable with four specific writing purposes: to argue, to persuade, to inform or explain, and to create. These four purposes allow students experiences in writing that range from sharing narratives (real or imagined) to very factual, evidence-based expository. The addition of the fourth writing category strengthens the call for students to practice analyzing what they are trying to convey in their writing, as well as practice making the product match the purpose.

Critical review and reflection of all standards is required in order to implement the best educational experiences for students. This review takes time, and time is a commodity that educators are often lacking. Common Core standards, while based on scholastic research, were deemed lacking, upon review by educators in this state. Minnesota educators saw opportunities for supplementation - they wanted more in terms of what, by graduation, students should achieve. By augmenting the Common Core requirements to better fit Minnesota students, the Minnesota Department of Education is simultaneously aiding students while also calling to light the dangers of limiting student education to what academic standards literally present.

Minnesota College and Career Readiness Standards

College and Career Readiness (CCR) standards were created by the Minnesota Department of Education (2018) to reinforce the importance of skills that are seen as necessary or essential to all students upon leaving secondary school - whether their pathway takes them to the workforce or college, trade schools, etc. Making it known that these skills and concepts should be touched upon in K - 12 classrooms, instead of being solely the responsibility of the high school or secondary educators, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) encourages that the CCR skills and standards be provided in both explicit classroom instruction as well as through authentic student engagement through activity or experiential learning. Much like other content area standards, these are the foundation upon which educators can build their own curriculum. However, this can be stressful for those at the local school level. In a study based in Kentucky, Ohio, and Texas, it was found that school district-level leaders in all three states wished that the state offered more direct and concrete instructional leadership surrounding CCR standards (Pak and Desimone 2019).

The standards themselves break down into four main competencies: Employability Skills, Mindsets and Social Awareness, Career Development, and Transitional Knowledge (MDE, 2018a). These four competencies encourage students to build and explore the different ways in which they will learn about, interact with, and pursue further education and employment goals. Employability skills relate to the soft skills that many employers look for, such as the ability to think critically and independently, as well as having a general base knowledge of academics. Mindsets and social awareness competencies work to build students' ability to problem solve and

support themselves through growth and change. Transitional knowledge and career development both serve students in getting to the next step, with the former aiding students in navigating pathways and the latter giving students opportunities to explore specific career goals.

As outlined in a plan by MDE (2018), secondary students, grade 9 and above, are also required to complete a Personal Learning Plan (PLP). The activities presented through PLPs guide students through an exploration of the many facets of their academic and career journey. Focusing on everything from academic scheduling for their high school years to career exploration and navigating the steps to get there, PLPs are designed to help students set tangible goals and allow for school staff and community members to be better prepared to support them in these goals as well. Ideally, PLPs serve many in the community, from students to parents to the community at large.

The idealized implementation of these standards versus the reality of how they are being used within secondary schools offers a glaring disconnect. The bottom line is the inclusion of these standards can feel like just another requirement on educators' hefty to-do lists. In my experience, many schools only encourage classroom teachers to utilize the CCR standards through the implementation of PLPs - with students completing standardized activities with little follow-up or actual connection to the skills schools are trying to foster. More specialized and implicit utilization of the standards could allow for students to connect and grow these skills in connection to academics or activities, instead of in isolation. As much as students need time to work on these skills, educators also need time and direct instruction themselves on how these skills and standards can be utilized authentically within the classroom.

Employability Skills

Overview

Employability skills, also called workplace skills or transferable skills, are the foundational skills that employees ideally possess before specialization within their trade or field. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) published a study in 2022 that polled employers about employability skills in new hires. Their findings showed that over 95% of employers found skills such as teamwork, communication, and critical thinking as highly important to the workforce, but that only 55.8%, 54.3%, and 77.5% of employers found the respective skills to be present at a proficient level (NACE, 2022). This disconnect between desired skills and outcomes is a call for educators to do better. Hora (2017) states “The specific failings of higher education articulated by skills gap advocates include too many four-year degrees in majors with no clear links to the labor market (e.g., arts and humanities), a ‘College for All’ movement that has led to shortages in middle-skill jobs, and a general lack of focus on jobs and careers throughout the educational system” (para. 3). To ease the transition from school to future plans, educators could and should be utilizing employability skills in their classrooms.

Employability skill sets work together to best serve a student in the field of their choice. The Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) and the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.) break these employability skills down into three sectors: Effective Relationships, Workplace Skills, and Applied Knowledge. Effective relationship skills showcase an individual's ability to have a positive interaction with both themselves and others, including skills such as teamwork, conflict resolution, problem-solving, etc. Workplace skills showcase an individual's ability to follow and

create systems, communicate effectively - both verbally and in writing, being able to find and utilize credible and applicable information, as well as being able to manage time and resources. Applied knowledge is the combination of learned academic or trade-based knowledge, as well as the ability to utilize prior knowledge and experiences to critically analyze any decisions that need to be made. Much like the Minnesota CCR standards which are separated into four categories, skills are categorized by whether the skill requires working with people, systems, or content knowledge (MDE, 2018a; OCTAE & U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). These three sectors of employability showcase that it is valuable to employers to have employees who can interact not only with others, but also with situations, potential conflict, and themselves.

All of these skill sectors are equally important in helping individuals become stable and successful employees in whatever field they may choose to pursue and should all be fostered within students. Hora offers a “holistic” (2017) view of these career competencies, making sure that all of the skills necessary are working in harmony given specific and purposeful contexts. In this regard, it is highlighted that any educator, regardless of their content area, can utilize employability skills in their classroom. Having practice and discussion surrounding what is expected in a specific content class versus what might be expected in others is actively showing students a more realistic vision of what future employers will expect. Hora (2017) further explains that while employers do equally value technical and inter-and intra-personal skills, they are looking for future employees “who could communicate in a specific disciplinary or industrial context: a biological lab, a research and development team in a manufacturing company, or a welding repair shop” (para. 19). So while many standards push communication, it is

important to note that general skills seem of less importance to employers than the ability to communicate in the ways a specific career or situation needs.

Education as a field is arguably a largely different world than that of other job sectors, and is often the only industry that educators are closely familiar with. However, it is critical that educators themselves are aware of the skills and knowledge that will put students in the best position for employability in any job sector. The connection between the general sectors of employability skills and CCR standards is not a mistake, instead, it showcases the importance of including CCR in the academic classroom. By utilizing CCR standards in conjunction with academics, educators are committing to showcasing ongoing learning themselves, as well as working to foster skills for employment outside of the classroom for students.

Soft Skills

Youth.gov (n.d.), a government site that catalogs resources and studies specific to youth, defines soft skills as the interpersonal skills that prove essential in not only a workplace but in many community-based situations where students must interact with others. “Soft Skills to Pay the Bills”, a curriculum created by the Office of Disability Employment Policy (2022) highlights six criteria for soft skills: communication skills, enthusiasm and attitude, teamwork, networking, problem-solving and critical thinking, as well as professionalism. The development of these skill subsets was based upon research and discussion with business professionals to determine what specifically students needed to be exposed to and allowed to foster before leaving secondary school.

While these skills are catered to the workplace or postsecondary plans, they do not need to be implemented in isolation from academic or social-emotional learning

(SEL) standards. Rather, the College and Career Readiness and Success Center (2019) encourages educators to review their own instructional practices in order to meaningfully combine these skills with academic instruction. Classroom practices that authentically utilize communication and interpersonal pair or group work offer opportunities for students to practice and grow these skills. Oftentimes a component of the soft skills, such as “critical thinking skills” applies not only to career development but also to academic and social and SEL standards as well (College and Career Readiness and Success Center 2019). The Office of Disability Employment Policy (2019) reinforces this, stating “Soft skills cannot be taught in a vacuum nor can they be acquired simply because the goal of a lesson plan indicates it shall be so. Rather, they must be ‘introduced, developed, refined, practiced, and reinforced’” (pg. 8). Educators are empowered to find the meaningful links between soft skills and academics. By implementing these strategies and showcasing how they align with knowledge and application, students will have a better understanding of how they may be required to use such practices in the future.

Soft skills are already being utilized within the classroom. Group discussions, project-based learning, Socratic seminars, and prompt-based writing, among many other activities, all utilize at least one foundational component of soft skills. However, by utilizing more implicit instruction of what soft skills are, as well as offering modeling and discussion around the use of different skills, educators can cement student understanding and ultimately comfortability in using these skills in the future. Much like content vocabulary is explicitly taught, these skills should be defined and practiced as well.

Teaching Employability Skills Within the School

To better serve students, many schools and districts utilize multiple avenues to expose students to employability skills. Pak and Desimone (2019) state “While there is generally consensus around the view that K-12 education should rigorously prepare students for the expectations of 21st-century colleges and careers, there is less consensus on how educational leaders should mobilize resources and human capital to support this goal” (p. 448). In Minnesota, as mentioned previously, College and Career Readiness (CCR) standards were created and require students to engage with goal setting surrounding postsecondary plans (MDE, 2018a). Minnesota State and MDE also worked to highlight career trajectories for secondary students utilizing the Pathway system (2016), a framework utilized by many schools in conjunction with the Professional Growth Plans (PLPs). The Pathways system is built on a view of what constitutes foundational knowledge: general learning and skills that, regardless of postsecondary plans, every student should learn. Outside of this foundation, the Pathways are shown by breaking down the employment field into six general career fields. Within each of these fields, students can explore specific jobs or careers that may be of more interest. The goal of this is to combine the work of the PLP, where students self-assess their skills and interests, with tangible and visible postsecondary employment and schooling (MDE, 2018a; MinnState & MDE, n.d.).

While this serves as a starting point for districts, oftentimes the implementation of these practices can be less standardized than idealized. As Pak and Desimone (2019) found in their study of CCR standard implementation in Texas, Kentucky, and Ohio, oftentimes state leaders put the impetus of what policy or standards look like in actual

practice upon local administration and schools - something which can lead to inconsistencies in instruction and opportunity across districts and schools. The stress of these inconsistencies can be further heightened when assessing students within a school that are English Language Learners (ELLs) or students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) or 504 Plans, as the content was often found to not match the diverse needs of a student population. Making space for all learners to succeed in gaining these skill sets is a crucial part of meaningful and successful CCR implementation.

Skill-Based Programming. Many secondary schools also utilize programs such as Upward Bound, College Possible, or Advancement Via Independent Determination (AVID). Upward Bound and College Possible work to help students navigate the pathways to college, from research to applications to financial aid support, as well as often providing support once students are officially enrolled (US Department of Education, 2021; College Possible, 2022). While AVID traditionally started with expectations of students attending four-year colleges and universities postsecondary, they have started to change program narratives towards any form of continued schooling, be that trade schools or community colleges as well (AVID, n.d.). However, even with this shift, programming is still shown to support students whose trajectories go in the direction of further education, not necessarily the workplace.

AVID. AVID, a program that as of the 2017 - 18 school year was utilized in 52 Minnesota school districts and 52 specific school sites (AVID, 2019), serves as a pathway to aid students in gaining confidence and practice in academic, executive functioning, and employability skills by offering an elective course geared toward students who are first-generation college students (AVID, n.d.). While the elective class serves a very

specific student population, the instructional methods and strategies that help build academic and employability skills are ideally utilized school-wide in any AVID building, thus providing the practice and strategies to all students. Built on a model of inquiry, AVID programming encourages students to discuss and question their way through learning, instead of being given a direct answer (AVID, n.d.). Much like in a workplace, where situations and conflict are to be handled amongst colleagues, students are encouraged to work through difficulties with peers.

The effectiveness of AVID programming, both in terms of success and cost, is often hard to pinpoint. Todhunter-Reid et. al pinpoint the difficulty in showing the effectiveness of programs such as these, citing that many research methods and results are determined through “descriptive statistics to tell their data stories and applied simple statistical tests like *t*-tests to determine if differences between AVID and non-AVID students are statistically significant” (2020, pg 682) while knowing that students who self-select to be involved in programs such as these are categorically different from students who do not make that choice. Beyond effectiveness, student retention, or lack thereof, can showcase a program’s ability to work within school systems. Mozingo (2017) conducted a study of high school students who began AVID programming as ninth-graders and found that 43.98% of enrolled AVID students drop the elective at some point in their high school journey. Mozingo (2017) found a high correlation between students dropping AVID and high school GPA and/or AVID elective grades, as well as a high-risk predictor for students who would ultimately drop AVID when there was a home language other than English.

AVID programming idealistically serves students who come from first-generation college-bound families and has requirements that students maintain certain academic performance levels (AVID, n.d.). While Mozingo's study was limited to one district, and thus cannot be applied universally, this highlighted the disconnect between program goals and effects on students is problematic. Todhunter-Reid et. al also showcase the additional problem of cost. As many of these programs have limited, quantifiable evidence that they are successful, it is important that schools and districts can decide upon their best options through analysis of not only the program curriculum but also the cost-effectiveness of that programming as well.

While programs such as College Possible, Upward Bound, and AVID can and do have powerful impacts on individual students, they should not be the sole avenue for students to be shown and taught employability skills. Given that most, if not all, explicit skill-based programming is a voluntary elective option, this means that there is a large population of any given school who may not have access to these experiences should they want or need them. By co-constructing activities and lessons that combine content and College and Career Readiness (CCR) standards within a classroom setting, educators are advocating for school-wide postsecondary readiness to a level that skill-based programming cannot reach on its own.

The Pandemic's Effect on Modern Workplaces

The full impact of the COVID pandemic on workplace roles and regulations is something that remains to be seen, however, it is clear that the workforce students are entering will look different than that of generations before them. Pazzanese (2021) quotes Joseph B. Fuller who states, "It's the Next Normal we're headed to, not 'back to normal'",

explaining that employer-employee relationships have changed and employers need to take what they have learned from this pandemic and utilize it to stay “attractive employers” (Pazzanese, 2021). The mandatory work from home order allowed many employees insight into what workplace flexibility could, and many think should, look like. According to a 2022 ADP Research Institute (ADPRI), 64% of all employees would actively look for other work if asked to return to the workplace, and that percentage skyrockets to 71% for 18 - 24-year-old individuals (Richardson & Antonello, 2022). Richardson, the author behind this study, argues that the separation of work and home has been further blurred for many employees, especially those younger and beginning corporate employees:

I think that for them, for this segment of workers, the change from workplace to home was probably pretty natural. It probably felt like an extension of their social lives in some sense, because they hadn't yet been cemented by the workplace. And so the challenges of going back to work are more formidable. (Hoff, 2022, para. 4)

With the perceived reality of more flexible workplaces becoming standard, this translates to potentially less face-to-face contact for new and beginning employees. Therefore offering opportunities for building the necessary skills and empowering students to independently thrive is more important than ever. **By consciously including CCR standards, educators within the classroom have the power to choose to include activities, technology, and lessons that will help students navigate critical thinking and communication in ways that match the changing social sphere.**

Classroom Curriculum and Instruction

English Language Arts (ELA), sometimes called Communication Arts and Literature, is a required course for all four years for all Minnesota secondary students (MDE, 2018b). As outlined by the MN ELA standards, the core instruction of these classes is designed to further student confidence and skill in reading and writing, and communication (MDE, 2010). While the word communication is often colloquially associated with the skills necessary for face-to-face interactions, students must be able to identify and understand all the factors of communication that combine into a true ability to communicate with the world. Converse Willkomm (2018) identifies five domains of communication: verbal, non-verbal, written, listening, and visual, all of which can be intertwined as we interact with the people and the world around us. By building a curriculum that offers a variety of activities incorporating all five of these domains, educators are allowing students an opportunity to identify, hone, and grow their communication skills in situations similar to the ones they will encounter in the world outside the secondary classroom.

The day-to-day instruction within a secondary English Language Arts (ELA) classroom is growing increasingly specified, and sometimes even scripted, in many urban schools across the country (Milner, 2013). While being offered as an entryway to curriculum, and often seen as an aid to new or potentially underprepared educators, these structured curricula offer a very narrow view of what could, and most likely should, be happening in a secondary ELA classroom. Empowering students to think critically and formulate their unique understanding of the world is important to not only employers but also rooted in the Minnesota standards for secondary students as well (NACE, 2022;

MDE 2010, 2018). In a study of secondary lesson plan design, Dover (2016) found that not only is it possible to align academic standards with social justice, many educators are doing this successfully. Educators in this study submitted lesson plans that utilized academic skills across communication standard strands, such as reading, writing, and verbal communication, while simultaneously offering students experience with discussing real-world issues and content. While her study required educators to self-assess themselves as teaching with a social justice alignment, her findings showed that 83% of submitted lesson plans aligned with CCR standards. While social justice is just one lens through which academic standards can be viewed and utilized, it showcases the applicability of ELA skills and opens up educators to the opportunity of utilizing said standards to foster growth and empowerment of the whole student, both within and outside of the classroom.

Implementing CCR standards and activities into the ELA classroom does not mean educators need to start from scratch and rebuild their entire curriculum. As ELA teachers, much of what is required of students academically is already in line with soft skills or employability skills. If limited in time and resources, educators can begin by critically reviewing existing units and curricula. Analyzing these existing activities and goals can allow opportunities for educators to find existing connections and either reframe or add in activities that more explicitly build these CCR standards, all while still following unit plans previously established.

Culturally Relevant and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Ladson-Billings (1995) offered her take on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), a pedagogy that served to minimize the disconnect that occurred between school and

home-life cultures of students. Working to empower educators to honor and incorporate aspects of student identity, such as culture, language, experiences, and more, Ladson-Billings sought an asset-based view of students, rather than a continuation of othering. Paris (2012) furthers this acceptance and empowerment of student identity by offering Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) to educational dialogue. Building off the work of Ladson-Billings, CSP argues that student culture, language, and experiences that students bring into the classroom should be more than experienced or celebrated, they should be embraced and sustained. Paris directly questions whether or not CRP does enough to ensure that students are allowed to maintain their own ways of communicating, or whether students in CRP models are simply seen, but ultimately encouraged to uphold dominant cultural communication and literacy traits and expectations. This shift from simply noticing and recognizing to celebrating and empowering communication and literacy in native language forms is an important key to classrooms with diverse learners.

In correlation with employability skills, CRP and CSP both serve as important markers for educators to make sure that activities and curriculum are working to build college and career-ready individuals and not simply upholding traditional dominant, often middle-class and White, views of what professionalism or workplace-ready looks like. These pedagogical lenses are critical when reviewing and implementing CCR standards and activities within a classroom, and should be kept in mind through all steps of curriculum implementation. Educators should work to process and understand their own understanding and/or bias around ideas of professionalism and employability, as well as discuss these definitions with students as well.

Student Engagement

Classroom curriculum rooted in Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) alone cannot guarantee student success; instead, students need to be actively engaged in the learning process itself (Cole, David, Jiménez, 2016). Student engagement is often studied, as it directly impacts learning and growth within classrooms. Engagement is measured through whether or not a student is actively participating, as well as if they seem positive about or personally responsible for the work that is to be done (Reeve et. al, 2004). Engagement is personal and every individual present in a classroom is going to have a different vantage point of not only what is going on, but also what is expected. Student identity and investment are a dynamic part of classrooms, and the perceived power dynamics, especially surrounding language and communication, within a classroom can also affect how students engage and connect with the learning process (Cole, David, Jiménez, 2016). Students are often analyzing more in the classroom than we can outwardly see, and this fluidity of an individual's language and cultural identities can often alter their willingness or ability to engage with the content that is being presented. Situations within the classroom that allow for students to feel empowered and validated by their linguistic communications will often lead to heightened engagement, while critiques of how something was stated by a student versus responses to the content analysis itself can lead to withdrawal of engagement.

This blend of unique perspectives and shifting vantage points is not something that should be diminished (Reeve et. al, 2004; Blair, Fletcher, & Gaskin, 2013). Instead, educators should focus on implementing independent work for students, allowing them opportunities to follow their pathways to learning. Educators are not, and should not be,

hands-off in this approach as there is still support and facilitation of skills that may be necessary. Educators themselves are often encouraged to try new practices, often with the encouragement of boosting engagement, but unless these areas of professional exploration are structured with ongoing support, many educators may find themselves lacking lasting power (Potvin, Boardman, & Stamatis, 2021). Advocates for project-based learning (PBL) showcase this practice as a curriculum avenue that allows students to engage in the meaningful practice of both academic and real-world skills. PBL offers more ambiguity, and thus students have the opportunity to follow inquiry pathways that will most closely mimic the expectations of work or later education queries or situations.

Maintaining true classroom-wide engagement can be difficult, and engagement goes hand in hand with connection and investment. As previously mentioned, each student enters a classroom with their own lived experiences, language preferences, identity, and more. These experiences and identities can, and should, be utilized when discussing topics that apply to both academic content *and* postsecondary skills. Through the inclusion of College and Career Readiness (CCR) standards, educators are bringing more than just academics into the discussion, which allows for additional moments for students to connect and apply their own meanings.

Furthermore, demystifying formal language around CCR standards is crucial to engagement as well. This is increasingly important when working with English Language Learner populations, but can benefit all. Through the explicit teaching of the often formal, and perhaps unfamiliar, language of the CCR standards to classroom activities, educators are empowering students to take charge of a task. By giving direct instruction

on what skills or phrases mean, and how they could look in a lesson or activity setting, students are given lower-risk opportunities to grow comfortable in what these skills are asking. With understanding comes connection, and therefore students are better prepared to engage when similar terminology is used in future classes or workplace roles.

Technology in the Classroom

With an increasingly expanding variety of mediums for communication, the number of options for how to communicate evolves as well - both within the ELA classroom and beyond. Adolescents are often faced with the decision of what communication medium to use, and as the options continue to multiply, their decision-making process grows more complex (Blair, Fletcher, & Gaskin, 2013). Blair, Fletcher, and Gaskin (2013) outline the communication decision-making process adolescents tend to follow. They outline how students assess what needs to be said, whom it needs to be said to, as well as if there are any limiting factors to different mediums, such as parents or schools having rules against certain technology mediums. This last component further complicates communication for adolescents as these limiting factors are often rules and regulations outside of their control.

While technology can be a helpful tool in the classroom, it can also hinder student engagement with class content. The prevalent usage of cell phones among adolescents is a concern when it comes to discussions of student engagement within the classroom. In a study focused on college students, Lepp, Barkley, and Karpinski (2014) found that cell phone usage, including texting, negatively impacted students' GPA and increased anxiety. In turn, anxiety was found to be negatively related to satisfaction with life. In other words, Lepp, Barkley, and Karpinski's findings appear to argue that as student cell phone

usage increases, other factors in their life that are correlated to satisfaction with life tend to decrease. While it seems easy to say *well, let's just limit or omit cell phone usage in classrooms then*, the reality is not that simple. It could be argued that since phones will always be a part of life, they should be a part of classrooms as well. A critical component of college and career readiness is the ability to self-manage one's time and resources (MDE, 2018a; OCTAE & U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Technology in the classroom, when addressed and approached critically, allows students to pilot and learn self-management techniques that can aid them in their post-secondary endeavors. Implementing technology guidelines, and discussing the why behind them, could help illuminate for students the importance of technology being integrated and used at the right times versus all of the time.

Digital Discourse. Electronic learning tools and environments, as pointed out by Ching and Wittstock, are not one size fits all when it comes to impact on student learning (2019). The program(s) utilized all offer a unique vantage point on how instruction should be done. For example, Canvas and Blackboard are not going to allow for the exact same experience as a tool specifically designed for peer-to-peer writing feedback. This is partially why educators moving to or supplementing with an online platform or tool for learning have the unique opportunity of embracing aspects of traditional, in-person instruction and activities, as well as adding to their instruction via the electronic resources they find (Ching and Wittstock, 2019). Strickland (2020) argues that while many classrooms want students to write, and respond to each other's writing, actual implicit instruction on how they can complete these tasks is often limited. Students need more exposure to writing, reflecting on writing, and reflecting on their *own* writing before they

will feel confident applying those thoughts to a peer's work. This ability to see a product and then reflect and respond in a respectful, critical way is a tool that will carry over to collaboration with peers in post-secondary settings as well.

Discourse via both in-person and digital formats is also a learned skill, and building student comfortability and success with discourse can also require explicit instruction. Digital discourse, like verbal in-person discourse, follows the process of taking turns - there is a statement and a response, and they are not happening simultaneously (Higgs, 2020). Much like with communication via writing, giving students space to reflect on how they tend to communicate (verbally, non-verbally, visually, and through listening) can serve as a foundation for further skill-building (Converse Willkomm, 2020). Often, in-person discourse allows us to build understanding based on things other than what is directly said - body language, visuals, spoken tone, etc. Virtual discourse, while allowing for more flexibility in who can collaborate or join the discourse, can limit one or all of these additional facts.

To work towards fostering positive virtual interactions, Martorano (2018) outlines three key tips: trust, communication, and technology. He articulates that, although different from face-to-face, virtual interactions still require individuals to get to know one another. Trusting one's group members or peers to not only complete their work, but also to work together to gain an understanding of each member's personality, identity and experiences, articulating and understanding preferred communication styles, and choosing the correct technology system for the required task are all things that can positively impact digital communication. They are also things that teachers can build activities and instruction for to help explicitly teach.

Summary

Chapter Two offers a literature review that serves to answer the question *How can College and Career Readiness standards be taught in alignment with state and Common Core ELA standards to improve student communication skills and academic engagement?* To fully develop an understanding of these components, I sought information on educational standards - both national and state for ELA and CCR, transferable skills, college and career readiness programs, as well as classroom curriculum and instruction practices. The first section offered a historical overview of academic standards in the United States, as well as a more detailed analysis of Common Core standards, as well as their implementation in Minnesota. Furthermore, I outlined Minnesota's English Language Arts and College and Career Readiness standards. The second section of this chapter outlined transferable skills as deemed desirable by post-secondary job markets, as well as higher education institutions. I also outlined college and career readiness programs, such as AVID, that are present in Minnesota schools today. Finally, I outlined classroom curriculum and instruction practices, focusing on culturally sustaining pedagogy and student engagement.

Chapter Three will include an overview of my capstone project which is focused on answering the following: *How can College and Career Readiness standards be taught in alignment with state and Common Core ELA standards to improve student communication skills and academic engagement?* Chapter Three will give an overview of the details, steps, and timeline that will allow for the creation of a website offering curriculum and activity ideas to fellow ELA educators. The goal of this website's creation is to streamline standard alignment by offering a resource to educators that

showcases activities and directly states the link to academic standards, as well as the connected postsecondary skills. Educators are often told of academic standards and workplace skills, but by outlining exactly how the two connect, they can be certain of the academic integrity of the activity, despite its, potentially, less traditional product. All resources will be based upon the literature reviewed in Chapter Two.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

The creation of all materials and resources in this project serves to answer the question: *How can College and Career Readiness standards be taught in alignment with state and Common Core ELA standards to improve student communication skills and academic engagement?* My project will allow educators to engage with and reflect on the connection between English Language Arts (ELA) and College and Career Readiness (CCR) standards, as well as be introduced to specific classroom activities and curricula that could be used to build student skill in both. In Chapter Three, I will outline the rationale, research, and timeline that will allow for the successful completion of this project.

Rationale

The ELA standards in Minnesota are currently in the process of being revised, and the CCR standards were implemented in 2018, making both a fairly new addition to the how and why behind secondary classroom instruction choices. By offering educators a resource that directly shows the overlap of these two sets of standards, as well as giving educators examples of activities, I believe that it can serve as a strong foundational point for updating the ELA curriculum within classrooms.

As a member of the millennial age demographic, I believe I stand in a unique position for the focus of this project. Within my lifetime, I have seen how much the workplace has changed, as well as how much more we as global citizens depend upon and utilize technology and the internet. As a student, homework was not done online until the very end of my high school career but became the main mode of transmitting

information while I was in college. However, the students I serve are members of yet another generation, and their perspective on what is useful or relevant is going to be vastly different. Maintaining an open and evolving understanding of what it means to be college and career ready will be critical. Most, if not all, scholastic research based on secondary schools is conducted by members outside of the age demographic of the actual students, and therefore will view all results, best practices, and outcomes in a way that could be very different than students themselves.

Throughout this project, it is critical that I remain aware of how my identity aligns with the majority of educators, but not the majority of my students. As a white woman within the teaching profession, my group membership further heightens an already present power imbalance between teacher and student by adding on societal and cultural power dynamics as well. Furthermore, as a United States citizen who has never worked or lived outside of this country, I also know that my view of what is seen as a college or career skill will be vastly different than those of many other cultures around the world. While conducting research and creating the curriculum materials this project will produce, I must consistently be cognizant of what I am actively trying to teach. This project serves to teach skills, not as an attempt to reinforce the characteristics of a dominant culture as the only means of success. Taking great lengths to remain culturally sustaining through all research practices and material construction is of the utmost importance.

Students are entering a world that is going to look vastly different than the workforce many of their teachers entered. By calling attention to many of these

interweaving factors and offering a spot to begin, I hope that more educators will realize it is important to continue to change the way we look at language arts.

Project Overview

The website itself will be a living document that can be edited and modified to best serve the educators who utilize it. My website organization falls into three major categories: scholastic summary, classroom activities and building and reflecting. By incorporating these three focuses within the website, the intended audience will find resources appropriate to whatever stage they are in the College and Career Readiness (CCR) standard adoption process.

For educators just beginning their career, or those unfamiliar with CCR standards, the scholastic summary section will offer background information rooted in the research upon which this project was built. For educators who are growing confident in their understanding of the standards and literature available on these topics, the classroom activities section will offer ideas for small and whole-group activities for educators. These activities and curriculum ideas will have both a summary, as well as guided lesson plan outlines so educators can feel empowered to utilize them in their classrooms. For those who are ready to begin creating their own curriculum work, the building and reflection section will serve as a resource for educators showcasing points at which CCR and ELA standards organically overlap, as well as resources that foster reflection on their own biases and understanding of what professionalism means. Through specific reflection educators can better contextualize their understanding and perspective of this work, resulting in more meaningful lessons for the students in their classroom. All pages

and sections will be able to be accessed from any point within the website, and supporting pages will be directly linked together to aid ease of continuity.

Intentionality of Design

By utilizing a website design company such as Google Sites or WordPress, I will be able to functionally house all aspects of my project in a way that stays organized for users. Consistent fonts, color schemes, and layouts across sections will allow users to navigate in a way that feels familiar and predictable. All aspects of the website will also be designed in alignment with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). Web accessibility breaks down into four main components: perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust (Kramer, 2018). Essentially, as a website designer, it is important to consider whether or not your website: has content that can be accessed via different modalities, can be navigated with or without the use of a mouse, has a predictable and easy-to-navigate structure, and can present information via different assistive devices, such as a screen reader. Without all these aspects, a website can be inaccessible to many viewers. Based on the WCAG (WAI, 2019), I plan on creating a website that incorporates, but is not limited to, the following considerations:

- Color schemes will be varied, with special attention paid to text and contrast background levels.
- Text sizes will also be at large enough sizes for ease of visibility, and text boxes will be narrow enough in size that they can be zoomed without scrolling.
- Communication of content will be delivered via multiple modalities, for example, written content and videos, to best serve all.

- Links will be identified in a consistent way other than solely underlining the hyperlink
- Any images included will have text descriptions

Assessment

The goal of any resource or material is to grow the knowledge of all those that are participating, and that includes the presenter. It is my goal that users of the website will feel empowered to leave their thoughts and critiques of what was useful or what seemed to be missing from the source. Within the website, I will have a Google form that serves as a comment section. Here, educators can leave their feedback, and this feedback can be used to better evolve the website and resources to serve real educators and students.

Furthermore, a large component of this project is classroom activities. When new activities are developed for the classroom, they will all have College and Career Readiness standard(s) identified. Included within the activity will be a student reflection form. Students will be asked to reflect on their own understanding of that skill, as well as offer feedback, both generally and whether the activity aided them in their understanding or growth of that skill.

Supporting Research

The website content created within this project will be designed using the principles of Transformation Theory, presented by Jack Mezirow. Mezirow states that our learning most often comes from analyzing our prior understandings - be it context, perspective, assumptions, etc., to formulate new understandings and learnings (2000). As many educators are going to enter into this work with their own experiences and understandings of the standards, it is important to emphasize the reflective nature of

implementing change within my resources. I intend to include reflection questions that correlate with each resource and activity to better serve educators in fostering their own meaning of standard overlap and resource creation.

Mezirow acknowledges that oftentimes in communicating ideas, participants enter into the conversation with a preconceived idea of what is right and wrong, and therefore are argumentative in nature from the start (2000). This dichotomy when looking at standards must be diminished. I hope to include many perspectives and ideas within my resources to serve as a break from this or that thinking, and allow for more authentic conversation between educators. I also want to make sure I include a feedback form so that educators can offer their own insights, feedback, or ideas to make this an ongoing process of learning for all.

Setting

The materials of my project are created with my experiences in mind - secondary schools within a metro area where the student population is heavily diverse. The school I am currently working at, and thus a large influence on this project, is a secondary, ninth-through twelfth-grade, building. The district my building resides within has roughly 11,000 students across 23 schools. 51% of the student body, district-wide, is students of color, and at my school site specifically, 72% of the student body is students of color. Furthermore, 16% of the student body is English Language Learner (ELL) students.

Based on state testing, student performance in the district falls in the bottom 50% of the state. When looking specifically at reading skills, 46% of the student body is at or above proficiency levels. My goal is that these resources will help grow reading and writing skills in the students of my building. However, the resources themselves are

presented in a way that I think will make them applicable to many classroom settings. By creating a living resource like a website, any educator with internet access will be able to view and work through the information and materials presented, and resources will be able to be updated and reformatted if and when standards change.

Intended Audience

The intended audience of this project is secondary teachers, specifically ELA teachers. My goal in presenting writing and communication research and activities is to give educators who are perhaps unfamiliar or uncomfortable with shifting standards a solid foundation upon which to grow their understandings and reflections.

Timeline

The timeline of this project occurs throughout the spring and summer of 2022. The foundational work of research begins in the spring of 2022, and the creation of the resources themselves will take place during the summer of 2022. During the spring term, a literature review focusing on the intersection of employability skills, academic content, and classroom engagement was written. Themes that were highlighted during this process include educational standards, employability skills, and classroom curriculum and instruction. Within these themes, a more nuanced view of what is being expected of students during school and upon employment was identified and explored.

During the summer term, the development of all website content and resources will be completed over a seven-week window. The timeline for website development falls within the following stages:

Structural design and organization. During this time I will be working to create a webpage with a consistent color scheme, navigation, and organized division of content

housed in three specific areas of the webpage: scholastic summary, classroom activities, and building and reflecting. This webpage will be developed using WordPress and the templates and building tools they have within their platform.

Content Development. During this stage, I will be creating content that will fit within each of the three website sections. Each section of the website is designed to

For scholastic-based writings, I will be creating posts that focus on the why behind this work. Posts will focus on broad ideas such as why it is important to bring College and Career Readiness standards into the classroom, as well as exploring professionalism through the lens of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy. Each post will be rooted in scholastic research and will serve as a foundational explanation for why this work is being implemented.

Within the classroom activities section, I will offer lesson plans that outline specific activities that educators could implement within their classrooms. These lesson plans will pinpoint which English Language Arts (ELA) and CCR standards are being showcased within the activity. Examples of activities that could be presented here are using resumes to pinpoint character traits, small group communication activities, email etiquette for a book review, etc.

The building and reflecting section will serve as supplemental resources that focus on educator perspective and bias work. These resources include a detailed outline of ELA and CCR standard connections, reflection questions to process what professionalism means to an individual, as well as an understanding of various communication tools utilized in the workplace today.

Throughout all developmental stages, editing and review will be undertaken in order to ensure the content is presented in a straightforward and approachable manner for educational professionals.

Summary

Chapter Three serves to outline the thoughts and processes that went into the creation of my capstone project. I have outlined the physical project outcome, the setting, and the intended audience for my work, as well as a timeline for creation. Through this work, I hope to enlighten and empower other educators to evaluate the standards from new perspectives and grow the collaborative work of honoring student life inside and outside of the school building. Chapter Four will work to summarize the project as a whole, as well as the continual learning the process has brought to me as an educator. I will offer thoughts and reflections on what was created during this time, as well as how it has affected my view of where my work will head in the future.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

For this capstone project, I worked to create a website full of both scholastic and classroom-ready resources for educators looking to explore combining college and career skills with academic English Language Arts (ELA) standards. All research and content creation was rooted in the exploration of the following question: *How can College and Career Readiness standards be taught in alignment with state and Common Core ELA standards to improve student communication skills and academic engagement?* Within Chapter Four, I will reflect on the knowledge gained throughout this process, as well as perceived next steps to continue this work. I will begin with a review of the literature that greatly impacted my work while providing insight into the implications and limitations of this work. I will also share the knowledge and insights gained throughout this capstone process, as well as the future impact that this work can have within both my own personal professional scope, as well as the educational field as a whole.

Revisiting the Literature

The foundation of my project came from my frustration with how I have personally seen college and career readiness skills being implemented within my own school communities, and the way I saw it impacting students' abilities to communicate in settings other than school or peer-to-peer. Often presented in isolated, one-and-done lesson sequences, these activities offered little to no hands-on experience to students, and thus their inclusion had little lasting value to students. The Office of Disability Employment Policy (2019) cements this, arguing that soft skills, an often overlooked component of college and career readiness, “cannot be taught in a vacuum nor can they

be acquired simply because the goal of a lesson plan indicates it shall be so. Rather, they must be ‘introduced, developed, refined, practiced, and reinforced’” (pg. 8). Through the development of my project, I hope to offer a starting to educators working to not only identify college and career readiness skills but really work to imbed them in the curriculum so that students can walk away feeling empowered and ready to utilize those skills.

However, figuring out how to implement these skills authentically and consistently within a classroom has proven more difficult than I had foreseen. Pazzanese (2021), quoting Joseph B. Fuller, explains that the world we live in has changed drastically post-pandemic, and, “It’s the Next Normal we’re headed to, not ‘back to normal’”. Through the shifts in both society and the workplace, employer-employee relationships have changed. This puts added pressure on employers to reflect on what they have learned from this pandemic and utilize it to stay “attractive employers' ” (Pazzanese, 2021). With changing postsecondary expectations and structures, it is critical that schools are also exploring the ways in which they could and should change in order to best serve their students. The challenge to schoolwide or education-wide change is that both rigid school day policies, as well as academic standards, still exist, which can limit flexibility. Through my project, I am hoping to showcase that standards can be honored and implemented, but in new ways to better serve students and the ways they communicate with the world.

I chose an asynchronous, blog-style resource as the format for my project due to the ever-increasing workload teachers find themselves within. Through mandated professional development days, their own interests and explorations, and the work of

collaborative teams, educators are always exploring, reflecting, and growing their practices. However, as explained by Potvin, Boardman, and Stamatis (2021) even though new practices are encouraged, especially when thought to boost student engagement, there is often limited continuing support to educators themselves. Without continued support, many educators may find themselves abandoning new avenues for tried and true, simply for the sake of personal and professional sustainability. It is my hope that a resource such as the one I am creating could transform into a community of educators reflecting on their own work, and supporting others in their journeys as well. By offering it asynchronously and through public access, educators have the opportunity to access it whenever they have the time and resources to fully invest in the work.

Through the literature review process, three key themes became clear: employability skills need to be both explicitly taught and consistently practiced, the way professionalism and employability look is changing and evolving with the times, and educators, while well-intentioned, do not always have the time and energy to undertake new avenues of teaching. Through my project, I hope to honor both students and fellow educators by succinctly showcasing things students may need as well as approachable ways for educators to implement them.

Implications

The work presented in this project works to showcase that creating opportunities for cross-content discussion and alignment of standards can be powerful and impactful to both students and educators. College and career readiness standards were the examples presented within this project, however, the same critical analysis of what can combine could be applied to any discipline. By offering opportunities for students to engage with

skills in unique and authentic circumstances, we as educators are fostering a higher level of understanding and heightened comfortability with what those skills are, and what they require.

Furthermore, overarching curriculum redesign or foundational ideas are often presented in professional development, but hands-on, tangible ways to incorporate it within the classroom are limited or skipped entirely. It is my hope that the work presented through this project will empower educators to try or adapt the activities presented, as well as feel prepared to create new activities of their own. Through the multi-leveled categories of research, implementation, and reflection, there is always a next step for educators to take.

For students themselves, the incorporation of college and career readiness skills within classrooms can offer students more low-stakes opportunities to explore their own connections to different career sectors. In my experience, PLP work has been very individualized, with students reflecting, often electronically, on their own and having limited to no discussion time regarding the content of their work. However, by incorporating College and Career Readiness (CCR) standards into the classroom, it is organically creating connection points for students between the PLP and other parts of life. By allowing space for students to have conversations about potential future plans in more settings than just the Personal Learning Plan (PLP), the CCR standards are becoming more of a discussion than just a to-do list task.

Limitations

My project was designed to align with Minnesota secondary English Language Arts (ELA) standards and College and Career Readiness (CCR) standards. While

Minnesota's ELA standards are foundationally Common Core, meaning they would align with many other states and districts, the college and career readiness standards referenced are uniquely Minnesota designed. While not every state or district may have CCR standards that directly align with Minnesota, I firmly believe that the information and resources presented have been crafted in such a way that they are able to be utilized and modified as needed. Through the inclusion of multi-level resources, from scholastic research to activities and reflection, I believe the content provided on my website will allow educators to best fit the needs of their individual classrooms and their respective academic standards.

As mentioned multiple times throughout this project, the constraints of time and sequence are always weighing on teachers as well. Many districts have teachers working multiple preps at the secondary level, with limited prep time to revise or re-envision what their classroom activities could look like. Other schools may require rigid, step-by-step sequencing for curriculum, with the goal of every student, regardless of teacher or classroom, receiving the same instruction. While beneficial in theory, these types of curriculum styles offer little opportunity for individual adaptations or modifications without penalty from the department or district. In situations where educators find themselves low on time or limited in curriculum change opportunities, the resources presented within this project may seem too limited. Instead, these teachers would benefit from ways to advocate change to school or district leaders on why changes to the curriculum could benefit students. Ideally, these types of resources will be available in the future.

Self-Reflection

While working through both the literature review and the project creation itself, I was continually struck by the difficulty educators face in balancing the inclusion of academic standards with authentic and creative knowledge expansion. While my project focused on and was developed with the focus on college and career readiness, I would be doing my students a great disservice if I implemented a classroom void of any flexibility or ambiguity. Education and knowledge can and should be passionate and creative undertakings. While working on this project, I realized just how much I want to ensure the balance within my own classroom and encourage other educators to keep the balance as well. The resources presented within my project should be utilized as a component of curriculum and content, not as the sole focus.

Simply put, professional development work is a new frontier in my professional career. I have attended countless presentations, but I have never been the one presenting the work to my peers. Structuring content and activities for the adult lens instead of an adolescent was a shift I had to be cognizant of throughout this entire process. Using the Transformation Theory, as presented by Jack Mezirow, as my base, I knew it was important to contextualize my work in things already happening in many, if not most Minnesota English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms. Mezirow explains that often learning happens in conjunction with our prior understandings, as we use our own contexts, perspectives, assumptions, etc., to construct new understandings and learnings (2000). The resources I am creating are for professionals, and I worked to make sure my language and presentation addressed them as such. Through the building of leveled

resources, from general explanations to more nuanced reflection work, I hope to allow educators to jump in wherever best serves their own prior knowledge.

Looking Forward

The construction of this project cemented in my mind my own belief that learning is ongoing. I want to instill this outlook within my classroom and share it with my students and colleagues through the work that I do. The work presented in this capstone is not solidified. As a society, our classrooms, and the workplace, all evolve so, too, should the resources and ideas presented within it. Future goals for this work include maintaining a scholastic understanding of what communication means in our evolving society, creating and sharing more classroom activities, as well as potentially offering resources on advocating for curriculum change, as briefly mentioned previously. While the focus of this project is rooted in College and Career Readiness, as this was a tangible jumping-in point, the future of my website relies on a more broad-stroke view of how to educate students in modern communication forms.

This project was created with students in mind. Therefore, it is incredibly important to me that the students I work with have an opportunity to share their own feedback on both their own understanding of modern communication, as well as critical feedback of any activities presented on the website, and thus used in class. Creating opportunities for students to reflect and critique the methods in which they are taught not only strengthens the activities themselves but also creates a community of learners and empowers students to find and advocate for learning that connects to them. Without students this project would cease to exist, therefore their input is critical to the future development of this work.

Summary

This capstone project was created from a steady desire to empower students in their communication, while also honoring and understanding that the ways we communicate are vastly changing. As technology grows, so do the ways in which we utilize it to share our ideas and perspectives with those around us. These communication differences apply to school, social, and employment settings - something which this work sought to address and explicitly teach. By empowering educators to reflect and build upon their own understanding of what communication needs are after students leave high schools, this project will aid educators and students alike in building solid foundational communication skills. In this chapter, I began by addressing the literature that served as the foundation for all content created within my capstone project blog. I then explored both the implications and limitations of the work I have done thus far, before moving on to my own reflections and next steps as I look forward to how this work could grow.

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